

Berry Picking

June

Strawberries
Bunchberries

August

Cranberries
Raspberries
Blueberries

Blueberries are probably the forest fruit that people associate with canoe country most often and are plentiful throughout the region. They like dry, well drained, rocky soil with good sun and are often found under jack or red pine stands and in recent burns. In fact, natives were known to burn islands to enhance blueberry production. The plants are a woody shrub, usually less than two feet tall and resemble miniature trees. The leaves are less than an inch long and willow like. The tiny urn-shaped flowers bloom from late-May into June. Blueberries almost always grow in patches from a few individual plants to many square yards in size. If you find one plant, you'll probably find more.



The first blueberries can ripen in early July but usually do not peak till around the end of July or early August. They are almost always gone by mid August. Weather patterns can affect blueberry production dramatically and also affect the season.

Blueberries themselves are easy to identify, looking very much like the grocery store variety only smaller. They are a dusty indigo or purple when ripe, have the characteristic "tufted navel" on the end and range from about 1/8 inch to 1/2 inch in diameter. Inside they vary from somewhat clear to purple but are always relatively transparent. If you find a "blue-berry" that has a mealy, white or opaque interior, you have a blue-bead lily. They will make you sick and they won't taste good either. More on the blue-bead later.

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There are two varieties of blueberry that can grow in the same patch. The only real difference is the dusty coating on the berries. The non-dusted ones are much darker, almost black, but taste and cook just like the others. Wild blueberries tend to be a little tart but sweeten as they ripen. Larger berries also tend to be sweeter but the small ones are better for cooking.

Blueberries are the best addition one can make to pancakes and with some real maple syrup on top you've got a little piece of heaven. I like picking a few for trail nibbles but you can also go all out and make a cobbler with them if you have the time. They do freeze well so you can bring some home to have with pancakes. Or you can mash them, add a little sugar and spoon over ice cream for a truly decadent dessert. In addition to the great taste blueberries are an excellent source of vitamin C.

Raspberries are next on the list for most folks and are also found throughout canoe country. They like disturbed soil and lots of sunshine. Recent burns and openings in the forest are likely places to look. Along portages trails and around the edge of campsites are good habitats too. Raspberries are opportunists. If a tree is uprooted by a spring storm, it's a good bet there will be several raspberry plants growing in the opening before the summer is over.

Raspberries ripen later in the summer beginning in mid-July and peaking in mid to late August but the season can extend to September in a good year. Hot, dry conditions can mean disaster for raspberries because they tend to grow in exposed places. The plants themselves are nearly impossible to kill and have been the frustration of many northwoods gardeners.

The berries are soft red in color and multi-cellular. Most have tiny hairs between the cells and are quite delicate. It's difficult to pick raspberries and keep them all intact. Raspberries are usually about 3/8 to 1/2 inch in diameter. The plants are groups of individual woody canes that branch out and have tiny thorns along the stems. The leaves are oval, serrated on the edge and usually from 1 to 2 inches in diameter. The plants are usually 2 to 4 feet tall. About the only thing they are easily mistaken for is thimble berry, also edible, which generally has much larger leaves.

Raspberries are a little tart and very good to eat raw. Because they cook well and have a very intense flavor they are very good in muffins, cobblers and other baked goods.

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Thimbleberry, also called salmonberry, is a close cousin to the raspberry. They also fill the freshly-disturbed-soil niche. Thimbleberry is less common within the BWCAW overall but many old roadbeds and trails along the edges of the wilderness are covered with thimbleberry plants. It is also much more common in the Eastern half of the BWCAW. The most likely place to find thimbleberry is on your way to the biffy behind your campsite. Another common habitat is along the roads to your entry point and even at the parking lot when you get there. Nabbing a few of these potent berries as you get out of the car is a nice way to shake off road daze. Look for the huge, maple-like leaves that are from 4-8 inches in diameter. The plants are almost always about 3 feet tall and very bushy. The plants die back each year, unlike the raspberry. Earlier in the summer, thimbleberry has beautiful white flowers that are similar to wild rose.

The berries themselves are multicellular and around 1/2 to 5/8 inch in diameter. They are similar in taste to raspberries although more tart and less juicy. Thimbleberry tends to have much larger looking berries but the characteristic "thimble" shape and larger seed-to-berry ratio gives them less actual fruit than most raspberries. They make up for it with flavor. When ripe they are a very bright red and will practically fall off the plants into your hand.

Thimbleberry follows the same pattern as raspberry, ripening as early as mid-July and continuing through late August. Sometimes there will even be flowers and nearly ripe berries on the same plant.

If you find thimbleberry you will most likely find lots of them. The poor seed to fruit ratio make them less desirable for cooking though. They make excellent jam but the best use is as a trail treat. You can also mash them up, add some sugar and put the mixture in your water jug to make a sweetened fruit juice vastly superior to anything you can buy in a store.

Wild strawberries are a passion for some and the best pickin' patches are closely guarded secrets. They like well drained soils and lots of sunshine. You'll find them in forest openings, along portage trails and around some open campsites. Strawberries do seem to like areas with more soil than much of canoe country has to offer. There is another variety called the woodland strawberry that grows primarily on rock outcrops within the wilderness. The distinguishing feature is smoother skin than wild strawberry and seeds that are on the surface rather than imbedded in the skin.

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Strawberry flowers are some of the first you'll find in the spring, the berries begin to ripen in mid June usually into July and can occasionally continue throughout the summer if there is enough moisture. The plants are very small, low to the ground and the berries like to hide beneath the leaves. Often it is the small white flowers that give them away. Once you have spotted the plants, you need to look carefully to find all the berries. Strawberries are particular favorites of many smaller forest animals too and seem disappear just as they get completely ripe.

Wild strawberries bear little resemblance to their gargantuan, irradiated brethren at the supermarket. They are rarely more than 1/2 inch in diameter but their diminutive size is made up for by the super sweet/tart flavor they pack. They do have the small seeds over their skin but are generally round or oval and not heart shaped like the cultivated variety. The plants are usually not more than a few inches high and the leaves are less than an inch in diameter with serrated edges.

If you find more than a fistful of wild strawberries on your next canoe trip consider yourself lucky. Wild strawberries are best when freshly picked so deciding what to do with them is not a problem. Just toss them back - one at a time.

Before we get into the exotic, there are some other berries that you will see throughout canoe country that are NOT edible or at least not tasty.

Baneberry comes in red and white varieties and is easily identifiable by its shiny, plastic looking groups of red or white berries. As a general rule, white berries are inedible. Baneberry is poisonous. It probably won't kill you but you need to be careful with small children if you see them around.

Bunchberry is very common in canoe country and is often seen in carpets on the forest floor. It's pinkish white flowers are very pretty in June and the berries ripen in July sometimes staying on the plant through frost. They usually have 4 to 6 leaves in a whorl with the flower or cluster of reddish-orange berries in the center. They are edible but have little flavor and are mealy. You could eat them if you wanted to.

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Blue bead lily or *Clintonia* is often mistaken for blueberries by less informed folks simply because the berries are blue. They won't get past the first one once they taste it though. The plant has long, slender leaves rising from the ground surface. There is a central stalk bearing yellow flowers in June and the waxy, blue fruit in July and August. They are not edible but not seriously dangerous.

Now we get into the more exotic berries for the real enthusiast. You won't be making any pies out of these or even putting them in your pancakes. They are few and far between.

Dewberry is a raspberry look-alike except for the size of the plant. It is a very tiny plant with a few leaves and one single berry rising from the center. It is a multicellular berry like raspberry and the leaves are very similar to the raspberry. The difference is taste. Dew berries are like raspberries on steroids. The flavor is amazing. They like moist, uncluttered forest floor without much sphagnum moss. Because they are so small it's very easy to miss them under other ground cover plants. You'll find them in July and early August.

Creeping snowberry is the exception to the white berry rule. Their habitat is unusual for a berry plant also. They like black spruce bogs. You can find them under a black spruce canopy with labrador tea and sphagnum moss as the main ground covers. Look for the snowberry plants on small hummocks or over the top of rocks within the bog.

The plant is vine-like, tends to grow in a mat, and has hundreds of tiny leaves (1/8 x 1/4 inch) along the stems. The berries are very small, about 1/8 to 1/4 inch in diameter. They are a somewhat translucent white and tend to be hidden in the leaves. The berries do not fully ripen until late August and into September.

The snowberry has a very unique flavor somewhere between mint and citrus. You won't find more than a few of these, so share them with you fellow travelers if you do.

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Wintergreen is not what is normally described as a berry but is a fruit. They like dryer forest floor conditions and are often found in the same area as blueberries. An older jack pine stand without much undergrowth is ideal. Wintergreen is actually an evergreen and does not drop its leaves or die back in the fall.

The plants are again, very small, no more than four inches tall and the shiny, hard leaves are less than an inch in diameter. The flowers and berries are under the leaves and are easily missed. The berries ripen later in the summer but mature over the winter and can be found in spring with a much mellowed taste.

These little guys pack quite a wallop and some may not like the intense, almost hot, wintergreen flavor. I like to use them for toothpaste or as a trail nibble after a particularly garlic-laden dinner. The leaves also make a great chew even if you are tobacco free.

These are a few of the fruits and berries you are likely to encounter on your next trip to canoe country. There are many other berries and fruits in the forest, some edible, some not. It is always best to be sure of what you are eating and taste test even if you feel sure. Very often the berries that can harm you taste bad anyway. Remember to be a good forest grazer and leave more than you take.

I hope this will help you enjoy your next trip to canoe country and add to the list of memories and experiences that keep you coming back. Don't forget the pancake mix!

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